

May Plato's Academy be Considered as the First Academic Institution?

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Abstract

Plato's Academy is undoubtedly the first higher education institution in history, and in ancient Athens itself represents the most important educational institution. It constituted in the context of the universal development that took place in ancient Athens, in the 5th and 4th century BC, and it continued to work until the Byzantine Emperor Justinian forbade the work of all schools of philosophy (529 AD). This development, which is part of the so-called Golden Age of ancient Athens, represents the period of Greek history in which the foundations of Western civilization originated, as we know it today. Plato appears as one of the greatest philosophers of ancient Greece, along with Socrates and Aristotle, to the first of whom appears as a student and to the second as a teacher. Philosophy in the true sense of the word was created in Plato's era in ancient Athens (Russell, 1975), and Plato's Academy, in which he, along with his students, talked about various philosophical topics through the Garden of Akademos, was the impetus for this development. There are also opinions that the development of philosophy after Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle is only of reproductive character when it comes to the basics of philosophy.

Keywords: Athens, Plato, Academy, Plato's philosophy.

“Let no one ignorant of geometry enter the door.”

“Μηδείς ἀγεωμέτρητος εἰσὶτω μοι τῇ θύρᾳ.”

1. Introduction

The Academy was founded in Athens around 387 BC from Plato, after his first voyage (398-390 BC) to Sicily. It was in a grove of the Academy, a suburb of Athens dedicated to the Athenian mythical hero Akademos, whose name was derived from it. The site was considered sacred because, according to legend, Theseus had concealed Helen of Sparta there and out of respect for his long tradition and identification with Dioscuri (Helen's brothers Castor and Polydeuces), the Spartans did not destroy him when they invaded in 413 BC in Attica (Ghomshei, 2012).

The Academy continued to operate throughout the Hellenistic period, to be shut down for four years during the First Mithridatic war (between 88 BC and 63 BC), when Philo from Larissa left Athens and fled to Rome in 88 BC, where he seems to have remained until his death. In 86 BC Lucius Cornelius Sulla Felix besieged Athens, causing great destruction. During the siege he “put his hands on the sacred groves and plundered the Academy located in the most wooded

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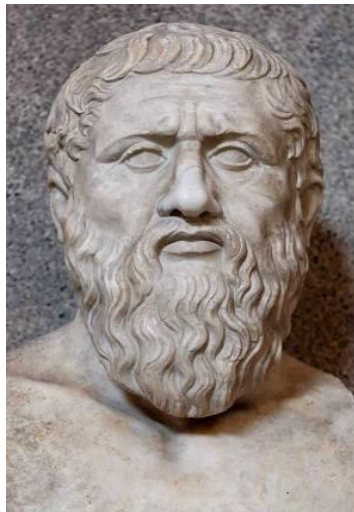
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suburbs of the city, as well as the Lyceum” (Nails, 1995). The destruction of the Academy seems to have been so severe that its reconstruction and re-operation was almost impossible. When Antiochus of Ascalon returned to Athens from Alexandria in 84 BC, it resumed its operation, not in the Academy but in the Lyceum. Cicero, who was also a student of Philo, describes a visit to the Academy one afternoon, which was “quiet and deserted at that time of day”.

It was finally closed in 529, after nearly 10 centuries of continuous existence, abolished by the Byzantine Emperor Justinian. In the following centuries the presence of the Academy continued, which at times underperformed, declined, and was renewed. According to Agathia (Russell, 1975), her remaining members, including Siblikos, sought protection in the courtyard of Chosros I in Persia. They carried with them scrolls of literary, philosophical and, to a lesser extent, scientific texts. With the Persian and Byzantine peace treaty in 532 their personal security was guaranteed.

2. Plato as founder of the Academy

Plato was born in 428 BC, the seventh day of the month of the targelion that would correspond to the second half of our month of May. He was born on the same day that the birth of Apollo was celebrated on the island of Delos, and was later called Apollo's son and messenger.



Picture 1. Plato

He was a native of an aristocratic family who came from Kodros, the last king of Athens, and from his mother's side, from Solon (Annas, 1996). His parents named him Aristocles after his grandfather and brought him up carefully from birth, giving him the best education possible. He acquired the nickname Plato (with broad shoulders) from gymnastics teacher Ariston from Argos, either because of his wide forehead, shoulders, manner of speech or breadth of spirit. Although he had the best teachers in gymnastics, music, mathematics, geometry and philosophy, and read the writings of older thinkers, Ionian cosmologists and Anaxagoras, Socrates would leave the deepest mark on him, whom he would perpetuate in his dialogues. The day before their first encounter, Socrates had a dream that a swan, a bird of Apollo, had fallen from his altar on Eros, landing on his chest, and then, as his wings immediately grew, he flew to the sky with a song that enchanted both humans and gods. When he saw Plato the next day, who was twenty years old, he immediately understood the meaning of the dream and said it was a swan he had seen in a dream (Huby, 1972). This encounter will cause a turning point in Plato's life. Socrates' life wisdom and virtue have conquered Plato and he will remain faithful to him all his life.

After Socrates' death, Plato, like most of Socrates' disciples, leaves Athens. He travels to Megara with Euclid who founded the Megara school. From Megara he went to Egypt where he learned from hierophants in Heliopolis and Memphis. Diodorus states that in his day, when he visited these lands, he was shown the house where Plato was staying with one Pythagorean. From there he went to Cyrene (in present-day Libya) where he stayed for a long time with the famous mathematician Theodore, whom he met in Athens before Socrates' death (Annas, 1996). From Cyrene he went to the Pythagoreans in the Great Greece (Magna Graecia), what was then called Southern Italy because of the large number of Greek colonies. The Pythagorean center was the peaceful and happy city of Taranto in which there was a strong Pythagorean tradition, headed by Archytas, mathematician, statesman and philosopher. With the intervention of the Pythagoreans, Plato was summoned to Syracuse, the court of the tyrant Dionysius the Elder. In spite of all Plato's efforts, Dionysius failed to consent to the establishment of a more humane order. Moreover, Plato fell out of favor and his first trip to Sicily almost did not end fatally. The captain of the ship, on which Plato boarded, was given a secret order by Dionysius the Elder to kill or sell him into slavery (Nails, 2019). The captain disembarked him on the island of Aegina and sold him as a slave. Although the law was passed at that time, every Athenian who steps on the soil of Aegina should be killed for hostility to Athens, they decided to spare him "because he is a philosopher" and they sold him as a prisoner of war. Destiny then wanted to find him in the slave market a wealthy foreigner, Anikerid of Cyrene, who had met Plato and befriended him during his stay in that African colony. He redeemed the prisoner and sent him to Athens for friends. These immediately raised the money to repay it to the redeemer, but Anikerid refused, saying that they were not the only ones worthy of taking care of Plato. This story is cited by Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius, who adds that some of the land and houses where the Academy operated later were purchased from the money raised.

Although Plato gave up direct political work after Socrates' death, he accepted the upbringing and education of a new generation that, as a true aristocracy of spirit and character, would transmit ethical-political ideas to the entire Greek world and practically implement them in many cities (Annas, 1996). The young people who attended the lectures at the Academy did not renounce active participation in political life, but on the contrary, they were preparing to establish better political systems that would resonate with the spirit of the best laws.

When Plato returned to Athens after a ten-year journey in 387 BC he founded a training school, named after the hero Akademos, a philosophical school called the Academy. At its entrance, Pausanias writes, there was an altar dedicated to Eros, the oldest of all gods, as told in Plato's dialogues *The Feast* or *On Love* (Plato: *Life and work*, 2019). Within the premises of the Academy was a shrine dedicated to the Muses, the patron saints of human art, as well as the altars dedicated to Prometheus, Hermes, Athens and Heracles. An olive tree is also growing there, which is said to have grown in Athens after the one located near the Acropolis itself.

Plato initially taught in the training area itself, and later in the garden and in the house he moved to and lived there in the company of young people who came not only from Greece, but also from foreign countries, one for knowledge, the other for general education and preparation for the civil service.

Plato interrupted his work at the Academy twice: between 366-365 and between 361-360 BC when, on the invitation of Dionysius the Younger, he traveled to Syracuse for the second and third time. The unsuccessful attempts to bring the tyrant of Syracuse to a more humane form of government are evidenced by the Seventh Letter, as well as by Dion's biography, which Plutarch conveys to us (Gondek, 2019). Plato's ideal of the philosopher on the throne would come true, though only for a short time and at the cost of his own life, Syracuse Dion, one of his favorite students.

In addition to Dionysius, Plato was also invited by many other kings and statesmen to come and help with his advice in establishing a better social order. Among other things, he was summoned by the Macedonian king Perdikas III, but instead of leaving alone, Plato sends him his student Euphreus, and the reasons for this are given in his Fifth Letter.

According to Seneca, Plato died at the age of 81 on the same day he was born in 347 BC. Plato owned an estate at Iphistiadae, which by will he left to Adeimantus, presumably a younger relative, as Plato had an elder brother or uncle by this name.

2.1 *Plato's Athens*

Athens, once the confluence of philosophers, artists, statesmen and warlords, lived in the shadow of ancient times in Plato's time.

After the victory in the Persian wars, a bloody Peloponnesian war ensued, and when in 404 BC after the aristocrats came to power, Plato, as he stated in his autobiographical Seventh Letter, wanted to devote himself to the tasks of state life. However, it soon became apparent that the earlier constitution was real gold in relation to the rule of the new government. In 403 BC the earlier democratic order was restored, which would condemn Socrates four years later to death, to whom Plato told that he is "the most righteous man of his time".

The general loss of moral values, which was reflected above all in politics, and from there, as a certain criterion of "anti-value", was transmitted to other aspects of life and society itself, cemented Plato in his belief: "All that I saw and more, which was not insignificant, angered me and distracted me from the evils", calling evil what was happening in the political life of Athens.

The founding of the Academy is Plato's response to the negative experience with Athenian politics (*Plato: Life and work*, 2019). Plato did not become a politician, but chose another path that would more easily influence society, through the education of youth. Not many of his students later became politically active.

3. Work of the Academy

Plato's Academy (Greek Ἀκαδημία) was a kind of philosophical school in which Plato taught. The modern term "academy" itself originated from Plato's philosophical school "Akademia", which was founded two kilometers northwest of the Acropolis of Athens (or on the estate at Kefis), about 387 BC. This place was the shrine of the Greek goddess of wisdom, Athens. Upon his return from Sicily, Plato began to formally teach at the Academy. Details from Plato's life are surprisingly rare, partly due to the Athenian custom of not naming contemporaries in literary works. Aristotle was a student at Plato's Academy for nearly twenty years.

In fact, very little is known about Plato's Academy.

It is certain that Plato and the Academy wanted to establish an education that is philosophical, but it also pays attention to the issues and problems that fall within the scope of the natural sciences and mathematics in particular.

In the area of that large park there was a Gymnasium, a kind of sports school of the time, where young men from the Athens' upper class met, trained together and organized various competitions (Gondek, 2019). There were lectures in that Grammar School in three basic directions: Grammar, Sport and Music.

Plato did not charge for his classes, but the school endured regular student contributions. Plato kept in touch with his students every day, whether in the classroom or at lunch. Lunch was common, which had a significant educational role, and that's why later

Speusippus and Xenocrates, Plato's immediate successors at the head of the Academy, wrote rules for this type of meeting.

Socrates regularly visited the Academy, and it is no accident that in almost all of Plato's dialogues Socrates discusses with young people and that this is exactly what happens in one high school, as it was the Academy (Gondek, 2019). After his first trip to Sicily, he taught first in the gymnasium at Academy Park (Sicily was the Greek province at the time). Later, Plato buys one piece of land next to the Academy, where he built a modest residence and several lecture rooms, thus establishing his own school, which later became known as the Platonic Academy.

At the Academy there were various fields of study in philosophy, mathematics, science and politics. The lamp of the Academy contained the phrase "Let no one ignorant of geometry enter the door", meaning that no one who did not know geometry shouldn't enter. Plato believed that geometry and mathematics were the only safe way to approach the world of ideas and God. In another interpretation, the word "ignorant" had a broader meaning, meaning lack of measure or prudence.



Picture 2. Raphael: *The School of Athens*

In broad terms, it can be distinguished five Academies in Antics. *First Academy* is signed as Senior Academy. It had heads such as Speusippus (Plato's nephew and teacher at the helm of the Academy), Xenocrates, Crates, Polemon, Hermodorus, Philip of Opus, and Crantor. This first Academy continued Plato's teaching, with a certain presence of Pythagoreanism, and under Speusippus the Academy turned to abstract mathematical studies and the practical equalization of philosophy and mathematics, which probably led to Aristotle's departure from the Academy. The *Second Academy* is governed by Arcesilaus. The latter Academy was close to skeptical views. *Third (Young) Academy* is governed by Carneades. The *Third Academy* was also close to skepticism. The *Fourth Academy* is governed by Philo of Larissa. The *Fifth Academy* is governed by Antiochus of Ascalon. The Fourth and Fifth Academies were mostly eclectic.

As we can see, like any living system, the Academy has gone through different ideological phases, so they are usually mentioned: the older Academy (Platonic-Pythagorean), middle and younger (close to skepticism), but also the fourth and fifth (eclectic). We can see at a glance that this is a necessary adaptation that has brought with it time, because we must not forget that it is a span of almost a thousand years.

It is generally believed that the education at the Academy lasted for ten years, and many students later continued to spread her ideas throughout the Mediterranean and there was almost no city that had not been influenced by it (Ghomshei, 2012). The list of Academy members, one of which is found in Herculaneum in Italy, shows that one of the Chaldeans was a regular member. Two women also listened to the lectures: Axiothea of Phlius in Arcadia and Lasthenia of Mantinea who began listening to Plato after reading a passage of *The State*.

After the collapse of Alexander's empire, the next important role of the Academy was outlined in Megalopolis, a newly founded city on the Peloponnese that from the outset was tied to the philosophers of Plato's school.

The ideal that the Academy instilled and pursued was the rule of mind and virtue, both in the life of the individual and in the life of the state (Blackburn, 1996). This was the basis on which the humane political system could later be built and the knowledge of tradition built upon.

After Plato, the Academy was run by Speusippus for eight years, up to 339 BC. Towards the end of his life, he invited Xenocrates to Athens, who remained in charge of the Academy for twenty-five years, until 314 BC. With his moral earnestness, his boldness, and his pure and strict character, he gained a great reputation with King Philip and his son Alexander, who asked him for directions to his reign. In his time, the life of another prominent student of the Academy falls, the great Athenian commander Phocion, a friend of Xenocrates who was forty-five times named commander of the Athenian army. Phocion was an example of a top military leader and philosopher. Humble, noble and moral, with no hair on the tongue when it was necessary to tell the truth, he had devoted his entire life to Athens like Socrates and the Athenians, and even experienced the same end. Charged and convicted without a clear reason by the Athenian democracy, and sentenced to die by drinking hemlock.

Politician, philosopher and speaker Demosthenes also descended from the Academy. He participated in the political life of Athens for years. Someone who also passed through the Academy was Chabrias, an admiral who in 376 BC at Naxos took the first Athenian naval victory over the Spartans after the Peloponnesian war.

Next at the head of the Academy were Polemon and Crates, both Athenians. One of the notable academics who ran the school at the time when Plato with Speusippus and Crates resided in Sicily was Heraclides. After Speusippus' death, he returned to his homeland of Heracles, on the shores of the Black Sea, and founded a distinguished school there, leading until 330 BCE.

Crates was succeeded by Arcesilaus of Pitan, Asia Minor. Then only the names Lakydes of Cyrene, Evander, Telekles and followed by Hegesinus, who was Carneades' teacher. Carneades was as ambassador sent to Rome in 156 BC with two other philosophers to represent Athens. He did not write anything, but in Rome he gave lectures performed by Cicero and other Romans. Carneades died in 129 BC and was replaced by Clitomachus of Carthage. He was a prolific writer, and his works seemed to inspire Cicero when writing some of his works. In 110 BC Clitomachus inherited by Philo from Larissa. He left Athens and took refuge in Rome in 88 BC where he gave lectures with great success and was listened to by Cicero himself. He died around the age of 85 BC. Many contemporary authors consider him as the last great academic.

Although the Academy itself will last until 529 AD, when Emperor Justinian I gave the general ban on all philosophical schools, after Philo only Heraclitus of Tire and Eudorus of Alexandria are mentioned as prominent academics.

The Academy's relationship with Alexander of Macedon, Aristotle's student, is certainly an indispensable topic. It is rarely mentioned that Aristotle brought up Alexander at the time when he was still a member of the Academy, and when the young throne ascended the throne in 336 BC. Aristotle left Pela in the same year, returned to Athens and there founded his Lyceum. Over time, the two became increasingly distant. Perhaps Plato's dream of a philosophically

educated ruler came true in Alexander. Through many of his actions, Alexander proved himself a worthy student of the Academy. He spoke of the Greeks as one unified nation, and later, when he conquered much of Asia, he never spoke of these nations as barbarians. He offered sacrificial gifts to the gods of Egypt, Persia and Phenicia with full reverence. The dream of Pan-Hellenic unity extended to the unity of all mankind, through a culture and philosophical education that was supposed to transcend separatisms and differences between people.

Despite the political breakdown, Athens' reputation has survived and has been the center of philosophy for almost a millennium. The Academy, where Plato taught, survived all other schools and took place, "like a pagan island" (as Russell said), and two centuries after the Roman Empire converted to Christianity. Finally, in 529 AD, because of his religious intolerance, Justinian I closed the Academy and abolished all non-Christian schools "and the Dark Ages descended on Europe". The new Platonic Academy was founded in 1440 by the Cosmo de Medici. He did it at Pleton's instigation.

Since the eighteenth century the name Academy has the meaning of the highest scientific institutions.

3.1 *Respect to mathematics*

They were mathematically oriented scientists who were involved in the Academy, such as Aristotle, Theodoros of Kyrenia, Leodamas of Thasos, Theaetetus of Sunium, Eudoxus of Cnidos, Dinostratos, and Proclus, Euclid, and many others.

The main contribution of the Academy to mathematics consists in gathering mathematical knowledge up to that time, mainly derived from the Pythagoreans and the School of Chios, classified, enriched, expanded and put them into a logical proof system. It further refined the proof methods and developed mathematical logic.

Composed of all these were the *Elements of Euclid*, which, although written in Alexandria, are the sole work of the Academy. Proclus states in his work *Comments in the 1st Book of the Elements* that "the system that Euclid chose for the Elements was Platonic (in accordance with Plato's dictates), and after accepting the Platonic philosophy he set the purpose of writing the Elements.

3.2 *Archeological spot of the Academy*

Today's visitor to Athens can visit the archaeological site of the Academy, located on either side of Kratylou Street in the area of Kolonos and Plato's Academy. There are important monuments, some earlier than the Academy, such as the sacred house of geometric times, the gymnasium from the first century BC up to the first century AD, where the student-athletes exercised, the Early Helladic arched house, and the peristyle building of the 4th century BC also were built. In the small park surrounded by Monastiriou, Teleefan's, Creont's and Plato's streets it was inaugurated in late November 2015 and operates the Digital Museum of the Plato's Academy, which prepares the visitor for his acquaintance with Plato and his work.

4. Conclusions

Plato's philosophy continued to live throughout ancient times, especially through Alexandrian New Platonism, and would later flourish again in the Renaissance. Its echo with the nineteenth-century German idealists, but still today, is large. The English mathematician and

philosopher A. N. Whitehead wrote that the whole of Western philosophy after Plato represented only notes to Plato's text.

The Plato's Academy was the first school of philosophy set up as a university (Huby, 1972), it had its own statute, program, rules of conduct, student dormitories, a library and everything else. It was modeled after the Pythagorean School, but with the difference that the students did not separate from the world. In addition to philosophy, students of Academy studied mathematics, geometry, astronomy, speaking, music, logic, grammar, ethics and many other knowledge that aimed to get to know the person himself, that is, to recognize the key moral values that an individual can develop.

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